

Down-to-earth interior design makes lofty spaces livable

By Merlisa Lawrence Corbett
Special to *The Washington Examiner*

Hip, edgy and super-cool, lofts are the dream homes of many urban dwellers. Yet the features that make these spaces desirable — walls of windows, towering ceilings, exposed ductwork and concrete floors — make them a challenge to decorate.

“The lack of walls makes it more challenging,” said David Schaefer, a design consultant for Urban Essentials, a retailer on U Street that specializes in modern and contemporary furniture.

Romanticized in films like the movie “Ghost,” lofts gained popularity in the late 1980s when warehouses in New York’s famed Meatpacking District were converted into spacious apartments.

Those “real lofts” are rare in the Washington area, Schaefer said. Instead, the high-ceiling knockoffs sprouting up around U Street, Rosslyn, Clarendon, Bethesda and even Baltimore, are “loft-style.”

“People call all these places lofts, but most of the time it’s one room with 20-foot ceilings, a concrete floor and exposed ductwork — usually the main living area. The rest of the space is like any other apartment. So the challenge is that open loft area.”

High ceilings create the illusion of space, but “generally most of these places are tiny,” Schaefer said. “Some of the rooms are 10-by-10 or 8-by-10.”

A good design for these spaces starts with multifunctional furniture with a small footprint. “The largest sofa we carry is 80 inches long,” Schaefer said. “Most furniture retailers consider this an apartment-size sofa.”

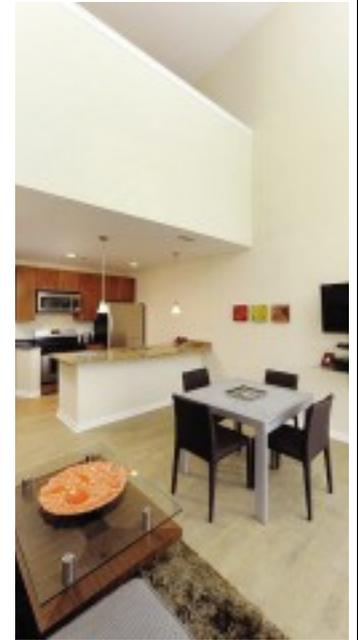
Urban Essentials carries a 24-by-48 coffee table that extends and turns into a dining table. They also have beds with hydraulic lifts that conceal large storage beneath.

An even bigger challenge is all those windows, which “seem like a gift until the sun blazes through the entire apartment and melts furniture,” said interior designer Chad Alan. Solar shades provide the best protection from the sun, and Alan



URBAN ESSENTIALS/COURTESY PHOTO

In a loft-style such as this one in Arlington, picking furniture with a small footprint is a good design.



URBAN ESSENTIALS/COURTESY PHOTO

Though the high ceilings of loft-style spaces give the illusion of space, the apartments often have little floor space.

Resources

urban-essentials.com
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suggested using clear tint, too.

“I did a penthouse in Dupont circle where the furniture was cooking from all the sunlight. I had all the windows tinted and it reduced the amount of heat by 45 percent. The windows looked the same. You couldn’t tell the difference.”

In one loft, Alan designed drapes in two shades of red and hung them from a rod system similar to one used in hospitals to separate patient beds. This softened the space without sacrificing the spectacular view.

He likes to use toile patterned wallpaper to enhance the limited wall space. “The juxtaposition of the wallpaper against concrete floors is stunning,” Alan said.

Ironically, many owners wind up concealing the features that most

distinguish lofts.

“Real lofts that originated in the New York sweatshops were warehouses that had high ceilings and original wood floors that were 100 years old. Builders jumped on this trend frankly because it was cheap,” Alan said. “They don’t have to put in carpet. They can leave ductwork exposed and leave one recessed light in a room.”

“I had to install wall-to-wall carpet in one loft because the concrete floors were freezing. When you want to put in wood floors over the concrete, all the doors are the wrong size because the floor is uneven,” he added. “I can’t count how many times I’ve had to hire an electrician to come in and rewire one of these places because the lighting is deficient.”

Getting a designer involved before a loft-style apartment is completed can help homeowners avoid some of these issues and get the look they want without the challenges.



CHAD ALAN INTERIOR DESIGN/COURTESY PHOTO

Using curtains or tinted glass can reduce the heat generated by large windows.



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